

Putting Healthy Food on the Table- Using SNAP to Improve Food Choices and Reduce Obesity in America

A Public Health Policy Initiative

Background:

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly called the Food Stamp Program, has grown from an effort to distribute excess farm crops during the Great Depression to the largest food assistance and nutrition education program in the United States serving nearly 36 million people in July 2009.

The increased food purchasing power provided by the \$4.7 billion in monthly SNAP benefits is a powerful tool for improving food security to the low income Americans participating in the program and improving the overall economic well-being of these households. SNAP can also do more to improve food choices of participants. If program changes were successful in promoting healthful food choices among the 36 million low-income Americans participating in the SNAP Program, these changes could yield considerable benefits in reduced medical costs for health problems associated with obesity and poor diets and increased productivity in the workplace and at school.

In the Farm Bill of 1990, State Agencies administering the Food Stamp Program were given the option of applying to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) for matching funds to deliver nutrition education (SNAP-Ed) to individuals who were eligible to receive food stamps. The first year of implementation was 1992. Since then, each participating State Agency has submitted its SNAP-Ed plan annually according to the guidance, which varies from individual counseling to broad social marketing campaigns that must include evaluation of the effectiveness of the interventions.

The Food, Nutrition and Conservation Act of 2008 (also known as the Farm Bill) authorized \$20 million for pilot projects to evaluate health and nutrition promotion in SNAP to determine if incentives provided to SNAP recipients at the point-of-sale increase the purchase of fruits, vegetables or other healthful foods. Known as the Healthy Incentives Pilot (HIP), implementation is scheduled to begin in FFY 2010. HIP is an important step for USDA to implement and states are ready to move ahead with additional strategies to harness the resources of SNAP benefits to improve health and decrease obesity.

The approach preferred by USDA has been to support healthier food choices through nutrition education and promotion. Dietary studies show that SNAP participants, low income people not participating in SNAP, and people with higher incomes do not

consume enough vegetables, healthy oils, or whole grains and have high intakes of saturated fat, sodium, and calories from solid fats, alcoholic beverages and added sugars. Education and incentives have been shown to promote changes in dietary intake and be very effective for low income families.

This paper proposes additional public health policy initiatives under the SNAP program that would improve participants consumption of vegetables, healthy oils, or whole grains and limit intakes of saturated fat, sodium, and calories from solid fats, alcoholic beverages and added sugars.

Proposed Initiatives:

The Institute of Medicine, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and Leadership for Healthy Communities have identified that improving access to healthy and affordable foods is an essential step communities must take to lessen the burden caused by obesity-related chronic diseases. We are proposing consideration of several policy initiatives under the SNAP program that would improve food choices and mitigate the impact of obesity-related chronic diseases in America.

Proposed Options for Improvement of SNAP:

1. Increasing the benefit level to allow for purchase of more healthy foods (3):

Evidence-based recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control, Institute of Medicine, and Leadership for Health Communities identify increasing access to health and affordable foods as an important step that communities should take in combating obesity. Research has shown that food insecurity is associated with overweight and obesity in certain populations. Therefore, one of the easiest preventions to decrease food insecurity is to increase access to services for low income families.

- USDA should allow State and Local Agencies to use SNAP administrative funds and/or SNAP-ED reimbursement to conduct marketing campaigns that increase participation, especially in SNAP, school breakfast, summer meals, afterschool snack, and the child and adult care food program.
- SNAP-Ed Guidance should allow local programs to engage in activities that increase the availability and affordability of healthy foods such as fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and low fat milk products in low income neighborhoods.
- Changes in the USDA guidance should allow the SNAP-Ed programs the option to conduct counter-marketing campaigns against unhealthy products (e.g., sugar-sweetened beverages).

- Coordination requirements and guidance barriers to sharing of eligibility information between USDA nutrition programs should be identified and reduced to enable participants to easily move between and participate in all available programs (e.g., SNAP, WIC, school lunch, etc.)

2. Financial incentives for sale and purchase of healthy foods

- Allow states the option to provide point of sale SNAP coupons to reduce the cost of target foods such as fruits and vegetables. This option does not increase the administrative costs like a change in the electronic benefits systems would, and most grocery stores already handle discount store or product coupons within their existing computer systems. Research has shown that providing low-income households with financial incentives and nutrition education may be more effective at increasing the consumption of fruits and vegetables than unrestricted cash or an increase in benefits.
- Create SNAP incentives and use USDA guidance for SNAP and WIC authorization of vendors to require grocery stores to eliminate point of sale marketing of calorie-dense, nutrient poor foods (e.g., promote candy-free checkout aisles and spaces).
- Establish minimum inventory levels for grocers of whole grain products, fruits and vegetables, low fat dairy products and other target foods based upon their SNAP and WIC redemption patterns as reported annually to the Store Tracking and Retailer Subsystem (STARs).
- Allowing states the option of a waiver of SNAP regulations to enable them to set standard for acceptable food within their individual programs. For example, a waiver could be used to prohibit the purchase of certain foods such as sugar-sweetened beverages or candy with SNAP benefits. While this strategy is an option, it has not been implemented and would be unpopular with consumers and grocers as well as being ineffective. Families could use other resources to purchase prohibited items, but allowing states to try it and evaluate its impact maybe a promising strategy.

3. Enhancing nutrition and physical activity

- Recognize that the causes of obesity are influenced both by diet and a decline in physical activity at home, work and school and an increase in sedentary activities such as television or video time.
- Modify USDA nutrition programs guidance (e.g., SNAP and WIC) to enable programs to spend equal time promoting both good nutrition and the importance of physical activity.

- Increase the match so that states can provide more effective nutrition education to participants using new tools such as social networking systems, email or text messaging. If states contributed \$1.00 and it was matched with \$ 2.00 of SNAP funds, more effective and specialized education could be provided to families regarding their diet, use of financial resources and nutritional and physical activity options. Research has shown that nutrition education can positively direct consumer choice.

4. Use SNAP benefits to promote or provide only specific foods.

Townsend has proposed a redesign of SNAP and provides a comparison to the existing program:

Topic Area	Food Stamp Program	
	Current	Proposed Redesign
<i>Nutrition Focus</i>	Increased calories	Improved diet quality. Support for U.S. Dietary Guidelines (fruits, vegetables, foods low in saturated fat, high fiber foods).
<i>Allowable Foods</i>	All food items sold in markets/food outlets participating in SNAP. No restrictions. Examples: energy-dense low-nutrient foods (e.g., potato chips, candy donuts).	The emphasis is on fruit, vegetables, low-fat dairy products, high-fiber (low-sugar) cereals, and whole grain products-food emphasized in the U.S. Dietary Guidelines.
<i>Allowable Beverages</i>	All nonalcoholic beverages including soft drinks, fruit punch, and other sweetened beverages.	Only those beverages meeting a predetermined nutrition standard (e.g., nonfat, 1%, and 2% milk; 100% orange juice).
<i>Food/Beverages Excluded</i>	Alcohol	Energy-dense (high-fat and/or high sugar) foods/beverages not meeting the U.S. Dietary Guidelines (e.g. soft drinks, cookies, cakes, french fries).
<i>Food/Beverage List Determined By</i>	Congress and Lobbyists for the Food Industry	Scientific panel of dietetics professionals, physicians, and public health researchers.
<i>Goal</i>	Sufficient calories	Meeting the U.S. Dietary Guidelines with improved health and reduced risk for obesity.

This option would require changes in the benefits delivery system and an increased administrative cost of operations. However, it is also very likely the most effective public health intervention tool that could be implemented. Many of the USDA nutrition

programs restrict choice, for example school lunch, school breakfast and WIC; and the USDA has experience with implementing criteria-based food programs.

Conclusion

It is time to move from the long history of the Food Stamp Program providing families with a safety net from hunger to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) ensuring a solid foundation for better health among America's most vulnerable low income citizens by providing increased access to healthy foods in all communities, improved nutrition and physical activity education, and individual options for states such as waivers and counter-advertising, including:

- * Increasing the benefit level to allow for purchase of more healthy foods;
- * Financial incentives for sale and purchase of healthy foods;
- * Enhancing nutrition and physical activity; and
- * Using the SNAP benefit program to promote or provide only specific healthy foods.

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